

Does Yellow-vented Eremomela *Eremomela flavicrissalis* occur sympatrically with Yellow-bellied Eremomela *E. icteropygialis* in Tanzania?

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L'Érémomèle à ventre jaune *Eremomela flavicrissalis* et l'Érémomèle à croupion jaune *E. icteropygialis* sont-elles sympatriques en Tanzanie ? Un couple d'Érémomèles à ventre jaune *Eremomela flavicrissalis* a été observé à Ndotu, Ngorongoro Conservation Area, au nord-ouest de la Tanzanie, en octobre 2015. Il n'y a pas de mentions confirmées de cette espèce en Tanzanie, ni de données à l'ouest de la vallée du Rift au sud du Kenya. Trois explications possibles pour cette observation sont examinées : (a) il s'agit d'occasionnels en dehors de leur aire normale de répartition, (b) l'Érémomèle à ventre jaune est passée inaperçue à cause de sa ressemblance avec certains individus de la sous-espèce *griseoflava* de l'Érémomèle à croupion jaune *E. icteropygialis* (décrits comme *crawfurdi*), ou (c) les oiseaux du sud-ouest du Kenya / nord-ouest de la Tanzanie (*crawfurdi*) ont été incorporés de façon erronée dans *E. icteropygialis griseoflava* et appartiennent en fait à *E. flavicrissalis*. Nous présentons des photos d'Érémomèles à ventre jaune et à croupion jaune d'un même groupe en train de chasser au nord du Kenya. Les auteurs espèrent que cet article encouragera les observateurs à prêter attention aux érémomèles en Tanzanie et, si possible, à obtenir des photos et / ou des enregistrements des vocalisations et de les envoyer au Comité d'Homologation est africain.

Summary. A pair of Yellow-vented Eremomelas *Eremomela flavicrissalis* was observed at Ndotu, Ngorongoro Conservation Area, north-west Tanzania, in October 2015. There are no previous confirmed records of this species from Tanzania, and no records west of the Rift Valley in southern Kenya. Three possible explanations for this record are discussed, namely (a) it was an instance of vagrancy, (b) Yellow-vented Eremomela has been overlooked due to its similarity to some members of the *griseoflava* subspecies of Yellow-bellied Eremomela *E. icteropygialis* (described as *crawfurdi*), or (c) birds from south-west Kenya / north-west Tanzania (*crawfurdi*) have been incorrectly placed with *E. icteropygialis griseoflava* and actually belong with *E. flavicrissalis*. Photographs showing Yellow-vented and Yellow-bellied Eremomelas from the same feeding flock in northern Kenya are presented. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate others to pay close attention to eremomelas in Tanzania, and if possible to obtain photographs and / or audio-recordings that can be forwarded to the East African Rarities Committee.

Eremomelas are a genus of small warblers (Cisticolidae) confined to sub-Saharan Africa. There are three very similar, generally greyish species of *Eremomela* with yellow on the posterior underparts (Urban *et al.* 1997, Gill & Donsker 2016). The widespread Yellow-bellied Eremomela *E. icteropygialis* is quite variable in the amount and intensity of yellow on the underparts, ranging from bright yellow over the entire belly, vent, flanks and undertail-coverts (as in subspecies *polioxantha*) to pale yellow confined to the central lower belly (e.g. *E. i. icteropygialis*) (Urban *et al.* 1997, Chittenden *et al.* 2012). In East Africa, three subspecies (*per* Gill & Donsker 2016) of Yellow-bellied Eremomela have been recorded: *griseoflava* in northern Tanzania west of the Rift Valley (e.g. Serengeti National Park) through western Kenya and Ethiopia to Eritrea and Somaliland; *abdominalis* from northern Tanzania east of

the Rift Valley (e.g. Tarangire National Park, Mkomazi Game Reserve) to north-central Kenya; and *polioxantha* from central Tanzania south to north-east South Africa (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996, Urban *et al.* 1997). Various other subspecies have been described in East Africa, including *karamojensis* from north-east Uganda, northern Kenya and southern Somalia, and *crawfurdi* in south-west Kenya, north-west Tanzania and adjacent Rwanda, both of which are typically now synonymised under *griseoflava* (Urban *et al.* 1997, Pearson 2006). Compared to the other two subspecies, *griseoflava* is more variable in the coloration of the underparts, the yellow in some individuals being paler and restricted to the lower belly (notably in *crawfurdi*).

The second member of the group, Salvadori's Eremomela *E. salvadorii*, occurs from southern Gabon to Angola and western Zambia. It has



Figures 1–2. Yellow-vented Eremomela *Eremomela flavicrissalis* appears all grey at first but on closer inspection, a pale yellow ventral area can be glimpsed as the bird forages in dense *Acacia* canopies; Samburu, Kenya, 24 April 2016 (Callan Cohen)

L'Érémomèle à ventre jaune *Eremomela flavicrissalis* apparaît initialement toute grise, mais lorsqu'on l'examine de plus près, la zone ventrale jaune pâle peut être entrevue quand l'oiseau cherche de la nourriture dans la canopée dense des acacias ; Samburu, Kenya, 24 avril 2016 (Callan Cohen)

Figures 3–4. Yellow-bellied Eremomela *Eremomela icteropygialis abdominalis* clearly shows a saturated yellow belly and flanks; Samburu, Kenya, 24 April 2016 (Callan Cohen)

L'Érémomèle à croupion jaune *Eremomela icteropygialis abdominalis* montre clairement un ventre et des flancs d'un jaune intense ; Samburu, Kenya, 24 avril 2016 (Callan Cohen)

extensive and bright yellow on the underparts and a song identical to that of Yellow-bellied Eremomela, and is often regarded as a subspecies of the latter. Finally, the monotypic Yellow-vented

Eremomela *E. flavicrissalis* occurs from south-east Kenya to Somaliland, across much of eastern Ethiopia and eastern Kenya, and marginally into north-west Kenya. The yellow on its underparts is

paler and more restricted than that of most races of Yellow-bellied Eremomela, being confined to the central lower belly and vent, as it is in immature Yellow-bellied Eremomela (Stevenson & Fanshawe 2002) and some *E. icteropygialis griseoflava* (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). It is most easily distinguished from any race of Yellow-bellied Eremomela by its distinctive song. At present, there are no confirmed records of Yellow-vented Eremomela from Tanzania, although the species is found close to the Tanzanian border in south-east Kenya and there are several unsubstantiated reports from Tanzania (N. Baker pers. comm.), including a sight record from Mkomazi Game Reserve in 1994 (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996).

On 3 October 2015, MSLM was with J. Francis & G. Tebb in arid *Acacia* bushveld less than 500 m from Ndutu Safari Lodge, on the border between Ngorongoro Conservation Area and Serengeti National Park, in northern Tanzania, at $c.03^{\circ}01'23.9''S$ $34^{\circ}5'40.6''E$. He whistled the call of Pearl-spotted Owlet *Glaucidium perlatum* to attract birds, whereupon *c.*15 species approached to within 20 m of the vehicle. Among them was a pair of *Eremomela* with very limited yellow on the underparts. Knowing that Yellow-vented Eremomela was unrecorded in the area and not being familiar with the local subspecies of Yellow-bellied Eremomela, MSLM assumed it was a pale form of Yellow-bellied Eremomela and paid the birds little attention. However, *c.*10 minutes later he heard the distinctive song of Yellow-vented Eremomela, a species that we have seen, heard and sound-recorded the song of in Somaliland and Ethiopia, and subsequent to this record, in Kenya. MSLM followed the calls to relocate the two individuals *c.*50 m distant. This time the birds were further from the road (*c.*30 m), but the clear views confirmed that the yellow was confined to the central lower belly and vent (as would be expected in the local race of Yellow-bellied Eremomela). However, the song clearly identified them as Yellow-vented Eremomela. MSLM played his recordings of Yellow-vented Eremomela from Somaliland and Ethiopia while the birds were observed to be singing, to verify that the song was identical, and unlike the song of Yellow-bellied Eremomela with which he is very familiar. Conditions were quite windy so no sound-recordings were made.

This record is unexpected for several reasons. Firstly, it comes from an area that is relatively well visited by birdwatchers. Secondly, it comes from the west side of the Rift Valley, when all records from adjacent southern Kenya are from east of the Rift Valley. And, thirdly, there was a pair, rather than a single individual, as would be expected if this was an incidence of vagrancy.

Three interpretations of this observation are possible. Given the large number of birders to have visited this area, at least some of whom are familiar with the difference in vocalisations between Yellow-bellied and Yellow-vented Eremomelas, one would expect that a resident population of Yellow-vented Eremomela would have been reported before now. Thus, our record could simply be one of vagrancy.

The second possible explanation is that Yellow-vented Eremomela is more widespread than currently believed, and that both Yellow-bellied and Yellow-vented Eremomelas are resident in the area. The latter may have been overlooked within the range of *crawfurdi* Yellow-bellied Eremomela because of their similar plumages. The ranges of both species overlap but little, and they are thought to be ecologically separated (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). However, in April 2016, we observed these two species alongside one another in Samburu National Reserve, Kenya. We located a pair of both species that behaved as if they were part of the same mixed-species foraging flock, and at times observed them in adjacent *Acacia tortilis* trees, each giving their own song while we observed their respective plumage characters (Figs. 1–4). In this part of Kenya, the race of Yellow-bellied Eremomela is *abdominalis*, which has more extensive and brighter yellow on the underparts than *crawfurdi*, and thus unlike *crawfurdi* is easily separated from Yellow-vented Eremomela based on plumage. Thus, it is possible that Yellow-vented and Yellow-bellied Eremomelas co-exist in north-west Tanzania.

The final potential explanation is that *crawfurdi* has been incorrectly incorporated into *E. icteropygialis griseoflava*, and instead belongs with *E. flavicrissalis*. Perhaps without direct comparison to *flavicrissalis* and *griseoflava*, *crawfurdi* was incorrectly placed in Yellow-bellied Eremomela (D. A. Turner *in litt.* 2016).

The record was submitted to the East African Rarities Committee, but was not accepted as a

first record for Tanzania in the absence of any photographic or sound-recording evidence. We urge fellow birders visiting the range of *crawfurdi* to pay special attention to its songs and to send any recordings to us or to the East African Rarities Committee (ea.rarities@gmail.com). Examples of the songs of both Yellow-bellied and Yellow-vented Eremomelas are available on Stevenson *et al.* (2014).

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